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UN peace operations in a multipolar order: Building peace through the rule of law and bottom-up approaches

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ABSTRACT

UN peace operations need a new peacebuilding agenda that acknowledges both the transboundary nature of conflict drivers and the multipolar nature of the global order. This means casting aside the current stabilization approach, but also abandoning the pursuit of liberal peacebuilding of the unipolar era. Such a conflict transformation agenda would require UN peace operations to prioritize the rule of law and bottom-up approaches, thus creating the potential to be embraced by a much broader range of member states. In this article, we bring liberal peacebuilding critiques into a discussion with debates on the nature of the global order. Liberal peacebuilding critiques are rooted in the bottom-up problematization of international interventions and show what kind of peacebuilding is desirable. Conversely, the debates on the multipolar nature of the global order expose the top-down constraints as to what kind of peacebuilding is feasible.

KEYWORDS United Nations; peacekeeping; peacebuilding; multipolar order; rule of law; bottom-up approaches

At the turn of another decade, something interesting is happening with the United Nations (UN) flagship activity: peacekeeping. In January 2019, the UN underwent substantial institutional reform, deprioritizing the term peacekeeping and subsuming it under a broader umbrella of peace operations. The former Department of Peacekeeping Operations was restructured into the Department of Peace Operations and became more closely integrated with the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs through shared regional divisions (United Nations, 2019). This reform was

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an attempt to address what the expert community has stressed for over a decade: That the rigidity of peacekeeping, which necessitates a military deployment and a state-centric approach, and the stark divisions between peacekeeping and other types of UN deployments are not appropriate for contemporary conflicts (Martin, 2010; United Nations, 2015).

Although these bureaucratic reforms were needed, there is concern that the UN has failed to effectively redress its peacekeeping approach and that the UN peace operations themselves are in crisis (de Coning, 2021). Missions are either closing, as in Côte d'Ivoire (2017), Liberia (2018), and Darfur (2020); are under pressure to scale down, as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC); or are being reconfigured into Special Political Missions, as in Haiti (2019). No new multidimensional peace operations have been established since 2014. As a result, the number of uniformed UN personnel dropped from around 107,000 in December 2015 to 81,800 in December 2020 (United Nations, 2020a). The contraction of peace operations would not be problematic if the situation on the ground was improving or this was an act of "right-sizing" missions, combating the so-called "Christmas tree mandates," that is, missions that are overburdened with tasks, reflecting agendas of multiple actors (Oksamytna & Lundgren, 2021). However, experts argue that is not the case. This contraction of peacekeeping has been attributed to increasingly inward-looking policies of key member states, especially the United States under the Trump administration (Hille, 2020); growing tensions among the five permanent members on the UN Security Council (UNSC) (Gowan, 2020); the rise of China and the resultant contestation of the liberal framework underpinning large UN peace operations (Foot, 2020; Fung, 2019; Jones, 2018); decreasing appetite among key troop-contributing countries (Boutellis & Novosseloff, 2017, p. 3); and the increased ability and legitimacy of regional organizations to substitute the UN as providers of peace (Gelot, 2012; Schnabel, 2018). UN peace operations are seen to be in crisis because the UN and multilateralism are in crisis.

These developments are straining UN peace operations, but they do not endanger the continued relevance of *the tool* of peacekeeping itself. There are an ebb and flow to peace operations, but UN peacekeeping has proved to be remarkably resilient to changes in the global order (Coleman & Williams, 2021; Peter, 2019). The question is therefore not whether UN peace operations will continue to exist, but how they will and could look like in the multipolar order.

To retain their relevance, UN peace operations need to embrace a new peacebuilding agenda that acknowledges both the transboundary nature of conflict drivers and the multipolar nature of the global order. This means breaking with the current approach that prioritizes stabilization and the extension of state authority (Bellamy & Hunt, 2015; Karlsrud, 2018; Peter, 2015), but also abandoning the pursuit of the liberal peacebuilding approach

developed during the unipolar era. We build on existing critiques of liberal peacebuilding to show that a new peacebuilding agenda would require UN peace operations to abandon the top-down *form* of the old liberal peacebuilding missions while retaining their core *substance*. Practically, this stripped-down version of peacebuilding would mean that peace operations prioritize the rule of law and bottom-up initiatives. Such an agenda is both normatively desirable—as it incorporates the core critiques of past peacebuilding efforts—and feasible—as its congruence with the broadly embraced Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative (United Nations, 2021) and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 (United Nations, 2020c) makes it acceptable to a wider array of actors.

Theoretically, the article contributes to the literature by bringing liberal peacebuilding critiques into a discussion with debates on the nature of the global order. Liberal peacebuilding critiques are rooted in the bottom-up problematization of international interventions and show what kind of peacebuilding is desirable for conflict transformation; with debates on the multipolar nature of the global order, exposing top-down constraints as to what kind of peacebuilding is feasible. As a theoretical contribution, we, therefore, bring the normative ambitions of the critical peacebuilding literature into a more problem-solving discussion about the nature of the global order.

We build our argument through two steps, identifying a problem and then utilizing critical peacebuilding literature to argue for a path forward. In the first section, we show how the current crisis of multilateralism has transformed UN peace operations, demonstrating that these have all but abandoned any conflict transformation ambitions and are now primarily using stabilization approaches to protect states. We show that this conflict containment approach is practically unsustainable and normatively undesirable as contemporary conflict drivers are transboundary. In the second section, we establish a case for a new peacebuilding agenda for UN peace operations, arguing that these should prioritize the rule of law and bottom-up approaches. Such a conflict transformation agenda has the potential to be embraced by a much broader range of member states, which is increasingly necessary in a multipolar global order.

UN peace operations and the problem with their current trajectory

Peace operations have always served the dominant interests of states. In the late 1940s, UN peacekeeping started as a conflict management tool, designed to facilitate the de-escalation of inter-state conflicts resulting from decolonization. In a bipolar world, impartial peacekeepers were deployed to monitor ceasefires between allies of the United States and the Soviet Union to avoid direct confrontation between the two superpowers. With the end of the Cold

War, the UN adapted peacekeeping to help states emerging from civil wars (Howard, 2007). This change was primarily a reflection of the newly found consensus within the UNSC and was underpinned by Western normative ideas. Peacekeepers were asked to assist with elections, reforms of the rule of law, human rights, and the security sector in addition to the more traditional monitoring tasks of earlier missions. As the normative agenda prospered under the unipolar order, tasks multiplied (Oksamytna & Lundgren, 2021).

Along with regional organizations and financial institutions, UN peacekeeping missions became pieces of a broader liberal peacebuilding agenda (Paris & Sisk, 2009). The underlying logic was that more stable institutions were a precondition for peace, and this liberal peace approach became the dominant international response to crises for around 20 years after the end of the Cold War. For the first time, multilateral operations had an inbuilt theory of change aiming to transform, not just manage and contain, conflicts. While the theory promised more than the practice could deliver, the conflict transformation ambition remains an important goal for sustainable peace (Paris, 2010). We return to these debates in the next section, discussing what form the original agenda is worth adapting for the multipolar order. In this section, we show that new UN missions have moved in a different direction with many of the critiques irrelevant to their work.

The nature of global governance has changed substantially over the last decade, with vast bodies of literature discussing the crisis of multilateralism and the connected contestation of the authority of international organizations (Dingwerth et al., 2019; Newman, 2007; Zürn, 2018). According to Thakur (2020), “almost all countries, especially the major powers, have instrumentalised international organizations as vehicles for the pursuit of narrow national interests, rather than maintaining an effective multilateral order as a global public good in its own right.” Former champions of multilateralism—the United States but also many European states—have their own complicated relationship with the multilateral system (Layne, 2018), and China selectively engages and reforms “the rules and norms of existing institutions to maximize its economic gains in the liberal economic order” (Feng & He, 2017, p. 24). Consequently, international organizations are increasingly reduced to the implementation of the lowest common denominator policies. The UNSC, where five permanent members wield veto power, is no exception, which has left a profound impact on UN peace operations.

Only 10 years ago, most UN peacekeepers were engaged in implementing comprehensive peace agreements and building post-conflict institutions—the core undertaking of so-called liberal peacebuilding. A decade later, all major UN peace operations are either tasked with limited protection of civilians or with supporting weak governments in their attempts to extend state authority (Bellamy & Hunt, 2015). While China has become more willing to

endorse limited protection of civilian mandates (Foot, 2020; Fung, 2019), the agreement on broader conflict transformation approaches has been more difficult to find. Multilateral operations built on a theory of change (as liberal peacebuilding was) require a deeper normative consensus about the ultimate goal of the exercise. Today, the multipolar nature of the global order is making it more difficult for the UNSC to agree on a broad agenda. UN peace operations are therefore becoming reduced to tasks aimed at conflict containment.

When the UNSC members can agree on a common course, these responses are increasingly robust, turning UN peace operations into stabilization missions. Such stabilization is at the expense of peacebuilding (cf. Curran & Hunt, 2020; Gilder, 2020). Unlike two decades ago, when the goal was to implement peace agreements, peacekeepers today are primarily assisting states and their regimes in responding to non-state violent groups seen as antithetical to peace agreements (Peter, 2015, p. 358). Contemporary UN peace operations are heavily militarized, helping host states achieve military victories. The most noticeable and talked about mission in this regard has been the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), which includes the “first-ever ‘offensive’ combat force” in UN peacekeeping, the so-called Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) (United Nations, 2013). Since 2013, FIB has been mandated to assist Congolese forces in fighting all armed groups in the Eastern DRC, with several of these groups explicitly listed in UNSC resolutions. The United Nations Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is similarly supporting offensive actions against violent extremist groups and organized crime, which in Mali are spearheaded by regional alliances, France, and the host state. UN peacekeepers are also increasingly relying on advanced military technologies, from drones to intelligence operations—a development that highlights not just the scale but also the intensity of their military engagement. These activities have been criticized for violating core peacekeeping principles, especially impartiality, as peacekeepers are helping host governments defeat their enemies (Laurence, 2019; Rhoads, 2016).

Once armed groups have been displaced, UN peacekeepers assist the host government in its activities to entrench state authority. If the first stage is done primarily through military means, the second stage involves police and civilian capabilities. The extension of state authority is designed to bolster often-contested governments and contain conflicts to their regions of origin. But as the containment of conflict becomes a priority in UN missions, peacekeepers become dependent on host governments that dictate the terms of cooperation while simultaneously lacking capacity to absorb the assistance offered—a phenomenon known as the fragility dilemma (Bøås et al., 2019). This results in the failure to provide services and security to the population or to adequately respond to the root causes of conflicts, thus perpetuating

the cycle of violence. We have seen this most recently in Mali, which has experienced sustained protests against the central government precisely for its unaccountability and lack of service provisions. In addition to the heavy-handed military operations fueling broader animosity, jihadists have turned this to their advantage (Osland & Erstad, 2020; United Nations, 2020b). Similarly, in South Sudan UN forces are protecting internally displaced people (IDP) camps from state security services, while simultaneously depending on the host state to consent to their presence (Day, 2019).

A number of scholars have analyzed the negative consequences of the turn to stabilization in recent missions in the DRC, Mali, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic (Gilder, 2020; Hunt, 2017; Tull, 2018). They highlight how the close relationship with the host government curtails the possibility for UN peacekeepers to hold these governments accountable, strengthening illiberal regimes instead of building stable states able and willing to respond to root causes of conflict drivers. This is not just normatively problematic but also practically unsustainable. By siding with one party in a conflict, the UN temporarily upsets the power balance, resulting in peace settlements that fail to reflect the political reality on the ground. This in turn complicates longer-term peacebuilding and reconciliation processes (Curran & Hunt, 2020). Many of the armed groups against which the new UN peacekeeping mandates are directed often enjoy widespread local popular support through the provision of basic services or, at minimum because they raise real concerns and grievances that the local population has against the government. These often relate to transboundary problems such as environmental degradation and resultant famines. If these groups are displaced, these grievances may be excluded from political settlements (Bøås et al., 2019; Peter, 2015).

Recent developments in UN peace operations have taken a dangerous trajectory. UN peace operations have abandoned the conflict transformation ambitions of the previous era, instead of focusing on containing conflicts to their region of origin. This is not only problematic for the regions involved but also unsustainable as a conflict containment strategy. The nature of conflict drivers and multipliers today means that neither population flows nor violence from non-state actors remains limited to contained geographic areas. While we see liberal peacebuilding as it was practiced during the 1990s and 2000s as highly problematic and unfeasible in a multipolar order, in the next section we contend that its pared-down version is the only way to ensure a radical break with existing policies.

Peacebuilding in a multipolar order: The rule of law and bottom-up approaches

Liberal peacebuilding is one of the more contested inventions of the international community in the scholarly literature. While a lot of the critique

is warranted, we should not throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Liberal peacebuilding was premised on a solid theory of change, where accountable institutions providing security and services for people were deemed a precondition for stability and sustainable peace (cf. Paris, 2010). This theory of change, while deeply flawed in how it was implemented and no longer actively practiced in UN peace operations, is still engrained in the thinking of many international actors, making it also the only feasible way forward in times when multilateralism itself is in crisis. Here we use liberal peacebuilding critiques to show how the peacebuilding agenda would need to be adapted to remedy the problems of the original liberal approach. We then demonstrate that this pared-down and reformed agenda is in congruence with the broadly embraced A4P initiative and the SDGs, making it acceptable to a wider array of actors.

Critiques of liberal peacebuilding have focused on two interrelated problems: its *form* and its *substance*. The first core problem with liberal peacebuilding is its heavy top-down approach, which influenced the substantive priorities of missions (Campbell, 2018; Osland & Peter, 2019). As a form, peace operations have been criticized for being a coercive strategy (Heathershaw, 2008, p. 597), for imposing conditionality from above (Chandler, 2004; Richmond, 2006), for prioritizing international over local expertise, which coupled with a heavy rotation of international personnel in missions (Auteserre, 2014) resulted in a lack of context sensitivity facilitated by blueprint approaches focused on empowering central governments (Mac Ginty, 2008, p. 145). Such top-down and centralized approaches hinder ownership and sustainable reforms, and many advances quickly falter when peace operations draw down (Chesterman, 2007; Donais, 2009). This is an important critique, which any reform agenda must address seriously.

The second core problem with liberal peacebuilding has been its bloated agenda, leading scholars to conclude that peacebuilding “reflects the practical and ideological interests of the global north” (Mac Ginty, 2010, p. 393). There is merit in this criticism. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, when the normative consensus around liberal values was widely shared, mandates of peace operations grew exponentially with various states, donors, and the UN Secretariat adding their preferred recommendations (Oksamytna & Lundgren, 2021). As interested states and donors most often come from the global north, the bias was ingrained. The top-down approach contributed to this bloated agenda with peace operations attempting to implement an impossible range of tasks without a clear sense of which should be prioritized. In his address to the UNSC in 2018, the UN Secretary General urged the Council to “put an end to mandates that look like Christmas trees,” using the example of the mission in South Sudan, which “cannot possibly implement 209 mandated tasks” (United Nations, 2019).

To break with the current prioritization of conflict containment and return to conflict transformation, both substance and form require rethinking. To ensure their longer-term orientation, UN peace operations need to return to the rudimentaries of peacebuilding, leaving peripheral tasks to other actors. Such a streamlined peacebuilding agenda requires prioritizing the rule of law, with accountability and transparency of host state institutions supported by UN peacekeepers coming center stage. With a blend of military, police, and civilian capabilities, UN peacekeepers are uniquely equipped to assist states in reforming their security, police, and judicial institutions, but also to hold states accountable in these areas. Reform of these institutions is essential for host states as they need to adapt their capabilities to handle some of the more pressing contemporary challenges, such as the urbanization of violence, transnational organized crime, and violent extremist groups. Understanding the drivers of violence and distinguishing between—and being more sensitive toward—the conglomerate of different (in)security state and non-state actors is essential to avoid drawbacks. At the same time, a focus on a confined set of tasks would allow peacekeepers to draw clearer boundaries between their activities and those of the host government. Such impartiality, as stated in the Capstone doctrine, “should not be confused with neutrality or inactivity” (United Nations, 2008).

Prioritization of the rule of law is important not just to avoid the pitfalls of the early incarnation of liberal peacebuilding, but also to gain broader support for other substantive reforms in host states. However, these cannot come from above and the broader peacebuilding agenda needs to reflect the needs of the local population, not the wishes of donors. When it comes to form, international actors need to step back to allow national and local processes to work by empowering local peacebuilders. Experts in both the policy and academic community have identified constituent elements of current UN peace operations that would benefit from reform and strengthening, particularly those that encourage greater reliance on local peacebuilding practices and community engagement (Gilder, 2020; Mahmoud, 2020; Súilleabháin, 2015). This is not about romanticizing the local, as some of the earlier critiques of liberal peacebuilding did (cf. Paffenholz, 2015), but about acknowledging that institutions and practices developed locally, nationally, and regionally often enjoy more legitimacy (Gelot, 2012; Schnabel, 2018). While challenges such as insufficient capacity, lack of resources, and pushbacks will remain, the combination of state institutions held accountable by UN peacekeepers and local commitment to bottom-up initiatives could ensure an impetus for peacebuilding in a way that externally driven initiatives were never able to. In fact, one of the few positive consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic is the way in which local peacebuilders and local agency have taken on a new meaning in a situation where outside experts were unable to travel. The limit to what can be done

from a distance shifted their dynamic to one of real partners (Mahmoud, 2020). Building on this development seems a good way forward.

The above-streamlined peacebuilding agenda, rooted in existing critiques of liberal peacebuilding, is not only one that allows for conflict transformation; we also see it as feasible under the current multipolar order. The proposal fits within two broadly supported UN initiatives: A4P and SDGs. The purpose of the A4P is to “strengthen peacekeeping by spurring collective action by all peacekeeping stakeholders ... through the implementation of a set of 45 mutually-agreed commitments ... across 8 areas” (United Nations, 2021). Area 6 under this initiative is peacebuilding and sustaining peace, which includes the rule of law. The SDGs are a collection of 17 inter-linked global goals designed to be a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. Within these, SDG 16 aims to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” (United Nations, 2020c). Both of these initiatives enjoy wide global support and therefore cannot be characterized as a northern or liberal agenda.

However, these initiatives are umbrella agendas with an inbuilt constructive ambiguity. The challenge, therefore, is the combination of their vagueness and their all-embracing nature. While important as framework documents, we are skeptical whether in the context of UN peace operations such broad approaches can contribute to stripping the Christmas tree to any significant extent. A clear prioritization of tasks—with the rule of law taking center stage—is needed for their successful implementation. This requires a broad alliance of like-minded actors speaking about the same priority. We have seen such processes work before under the A4P, where 10 countries—from both the global north and the global south—have performed broad consultation on five cross-cutting areas in order to revitalize the diminishing support for peace operations (United Nations, 2021). An alliance focused on a single and broadly acceptable priority has more purchase in persuading others to commit politically and economically, than a cacophony of voices each advancing its boutique item.

Conclusion

The current crisis of multilateralism represents a unique opportunity to forge a new path for UN peace operations. The combination of fewer resources to fund multilateral missions, continued competition between global and regional powers, and less consensus on the broader liberal normative agenda implies a direction towards a more pragmatic era for UN peace operations (de Coning & Peter, 2019; Moe & Stepputat, 2018). To gain the support of broader membership, UN peace operations will not be able to

pursue the enlarged agendas of the liberal peacebuilding era. As critiques of liberal peacebuilding show, this is not a bad thing. This pragmatic era, however, does not need to continue with stabilization mandates and could again incorporate a more substantive peacebuilding agenda with a conflict transformation potential.

UN peace operations have proven resilient to changes in the global order. The state of multilateralism today makes it easy for member states to continue on the current path of the lowest common denominator, prioritizing conflict containment over more ambitious agendas. Bureaucracies, especially the size of the UN, are also not good at changing directions or stepping back to allow for bottom-up approaches to work. However, contemporary challenges disregard borders and require multilateral cooperation. Thus, a new framework is needed. Based on critiques of liberal peacebuilding, our argument is two-fold. First, UN peace operations need to focus on a peacebuilding agenda prioritizing the rule of law, with a central focus on accountability and transparency of host state institutions. Second, peace must be built from below. There is simply no way around this. This is not an easy agenda to achieve. However, the congruence of our proposal with two broadly endorsed initiatives—A4P and SDGs—and the fact that similarly focused initiatives have been successful in the past makes it a feasible one.

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